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Christophe Girot

Movism

prologue to a new visual theory in landscape architecture

Marc Schwarz
video image selection

From: Landschaft als urbanes Fragment,
Zürich ETHZ, SS 2000.

If we accept the precept that landscape architecture has always been bound to a strong pictorial and aesthetic tradition, then we are entitled to ask what referential image, if any, prevails in today's landscape practice. Ever since the early Renaissance there has always been a strong and determined picture frame in which our perception of landscape has expanded and matured, but with the advent of the moving image, particularly within new media, the notion of a precise reference image has become both relative and confused. New media simply brings us too many images, they are diffused via t.v. into countless superimpositions and impressions which, because of their sheer quantity and incessant flux, become a valueless juxtaposition of pictures. Walter Benjamin had already understood this problem when he referred to the work of art in the age of reproduction, and although he essentially dealt with the question of the diluted meaning of art within mass culture, he touched upon something that has become quite overwhelming today: the overabundance of image in the age of mass media. Another major hurdle which we have not yet integrated in our reflection on contemporary landscape aesthetics, is the ever growing presence and significance of the moving image in our daily lives and in our very own visual thinking. Outside the home



window, today's reference frame for landscapes is almost always in motion, be it the windshield of a car, the window of a train or an airplane, or simply the film screen showing a wonderful sample of springtime promenade in the meadows to sell us some piece of chocolate. Over the last century, the moving picture and its depiction of nature has broadly invaded and surpassed the traditional landscape iconic system that we had grown accustomed to. The truth of the matter is, that we have lost the thread that once

linked us to such a strong, simple and meditative acceptance of a single picture as landscape reference. This is the reason why we have sought together with Marc Schwarz, Udo Weilacher, André Müller and Fred Truniger of the Landscape Video Lab and the Landscape Post Graduate programme at the ETH, to pursue with the help of students the question of framing and sampling new modes of representation and observation in landscape architecture.

"Movism": I would like to postulate that a moving picture can and should become the visual reference mode for contemporary landscape design. Several reasons plead in favour of such a choice. The accessibility and immediacy of moving images that are captured and manipulated in video, bring us closer to a sensual and experiential depiction than other means of communication that we have grown accustomed to. And as a matter of fact, it seems rather difficult to imagine any other way to grasp the true, albeit fleeting essence of our epoch outside the culture of the moving picture. John Berger in his book entitled *The Sense of Sight* talks about "the moment of cubism"; and although he is still referring to a late modern pictorial mode on the brink of total expressionism and abstraction, his remark about the convergence of innovations and perceptual change that impacted society at large, applies to contemporary "movism" as well.

"At the moment of Cubism, no denials were necessary. It was a moment of prophecy, but prophecy as the basis of a transformation that had actually begun... Cubism changed the nature of the relationship between the painted image and reality, and by so doing it expressed a new relationship between man and reality."¹

I am convinced that we are living similar times with the moving picture and its wider ramifications via internet and home computer video technology. This is why we can call this phenomenon without any irony "movism". Whether "movism" has already had an impact on the relationship between man and his perceptual reality is not to be doubted, it is rather the question of the degree and depth to which it has influenced our way of seeing and projecting on the world that matters now. The birth of the moving picture one hundred years ago coincides roughly with the birth of the ever more rapidly moving man. How such a coincidence has impacted our way of seeing, and the aesthetics of our very own environment remains to be proven. I would argue, whether we like it or not, that we are more than ever determined by "movism" in our daily choices and visions. We experience on a daily basis, an extremely complex set of parameters which literally set ourselves as well as our living environment in motion.



**" ... Cubism changed the nature of the relationship
between the painted image and reality ... "**

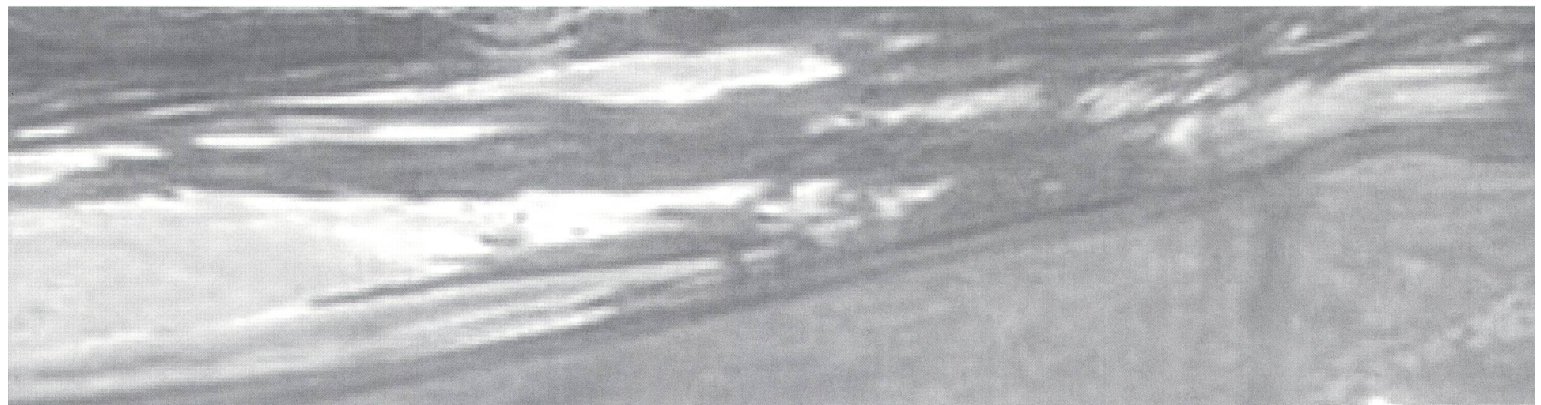
John Berger



Video works have the immense advantage of showing just a partial and subjective point of view. They hint at the idea that each individual sees and experiences things differently, in different places, at different speeds and various times of day. They play with landscapes as settings for solitary meditation or on the contrary as a receptacle for crowds and events. All these observations however relative they may be, have a direct impact on subsequent design choices and orientations for any given place. The video no longer refers to a static icon or distant image from elsewhere, it does



not borrow its aesthetic from a ready-made image, it is just a sample of the raw stuff at hand at the given time and place when the video take was made. Each site, therefore, becomes self referential, and the individual works distinguish themselves from one another by the specific framing and picture sequence that is chosen. One could of course still argue that all this is just nonsense, that landscapes never move, and that for this reason alone, the still picture should continue to have a central role to play in our profession. But I defy anybody to tell me that our world has remained unchanged over the past hundred years, and although some mountains still have not moved, rivers have flowed, overflowed and changed their course, and people have moved and flown and fought around almost every point of the globe. With new technology, images and sounds have been zapped at ever greater speeds. They have produced a visual and sound culture of their own, with its very own electronic horizons as Paul Virilio would say. Do not get me wrong, I am not a proponent of landscape as rap. I just believe that in terms of value theory there has been a paradigm shift with respect to the place of vision and sound in our society, and I am convinced that what I name



"movism" ought to be thoroughly integrated in each and every design operation to come. Everything has become so relative through movement; some environments can be extremely comfortable when experienced at certain speeds and become most disquieting at others. Outside coloured plans and sections and perfect picture postcard views, what are the present tools of representation that we work with? "Movism", is just about looking at the world in a different, sometimes deranged way, to bring forth reactions and maybe even true sentiment in design.



Our nostalgic forbearers, proponents of Arcadian models based on the picturesque still have their place in our hearts today, but theirs is a model that has had a very limited impact on the world that we presently experience. As John Dixon Hunt would say, there have been many lost opportunities to rethink and reinvent landscape with respect to our modern environment:

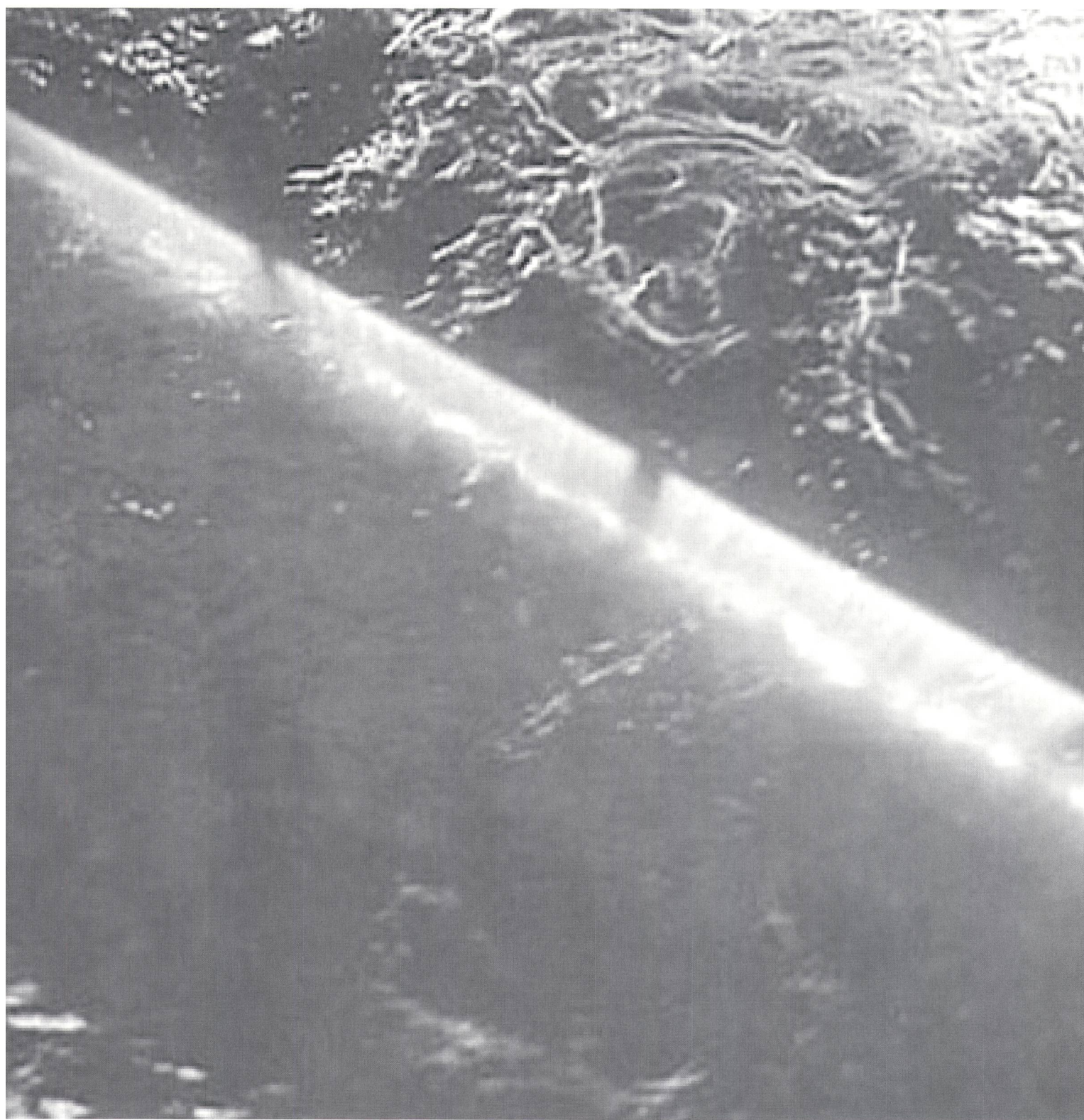
"From the late eighteenth century an obsession with one kind of garden—basically the English landscape or sometimes (significantly) the picturesque garden of the upper and middling landed gentry — seems to have prevented theory from addressing the many other types of site that the modern world has called for since that watershed of 1800. The grounds of a typical English country estate provided the model for all nineteenth century developments: the cemetery, the public park, the golf course. And the fixation on that one hypothetical model doubtless explains some of the great missed opportunities of the twentieth century: airports, the highway, the railroad..."

Is it not ironic to note that all the missed opportunities mentioned, have to do with movement, displacement and generally speaking the framing of a space-time phenomenon within the landscape? Could there not be more of a correlation between these landscapes of motion and our very own picture motion culture? Today we are at a loss when it comes to finding such clear and dynamic visual references, and the explanation for this loss probably lies in a series of disciplinary choices that the profession has made over the last decades, which have removed us gradually from landscape as an aesthetic and visual process and pushed us more towards landscape as a scientific and abstract model oriented field.

Is it not all too surprising, in an age where pictures are vibrant and moving all around us, to find out that landscape architecture is experiencing an extraordinary loss of imageability? This can be plainly explained by the fact that we are now working in the absence of a visual reference that is congruent with today's environment. When looking at the mangle of unmentionable

" ... the fixation on that one hypothetical model doubtless explains some of the great missed opportunities of the twentieth century: airports, the highway, the railroad ..."

John Dixon Hunt



"... that memory may help to redress the balance."
Simon Shama



landscapes with no proper form or name that clutter our urban peripheries, the visual reference is not only absent it is wilfully put aside as something unscientific, self indulgent and superfluous. These are the landscapes in which "greening", albeit ecological greening, has confined itself to an anaesthetic role in the shadow of great urban interstices. These scientific models whether ecological, sociological, geographical or otherwise, need no aesthetic base to justify their existence. But it is precisely the absence of such an aesthetic base in these models, that makes them completely foreign to the very idea of landscape with respect to its cultural roots. An applied scienti-



fic model provides an answer which tends to substitute itself for any given formal or aesthetic consideration. My goal here, is not to disqualify ecology and what it stands for as a science, but to underline its inherent aesthetic limitations and disinterest with visual thinking. As the French philosopher Alain Roger would say with a tint of polemic provocation, landscape ecology has nothing to do with landscape as we understand it since the Renaissance. His definition of landscape underlines the importance of the aesthetic frame of reference where the very human and albeit symbolic representation of nature becomes of prime importance. Landscape has much more to do with the viewer and the thing viewed, than with some form of scientific modelling. When we speak of landscape we are a far cry from the models of Haeckel and his followers which literally attempted to substitute an eminently aesthetic domain for a scientific one. The fact of the matter is that such scientific models have failed to operate and failed to convince precisely in the domain of landscape aesthetics. This leaves us with an aesthetic vacuum in the absence of a clearly defined pictorial reference system. And the very idea that these scientific models could invent an aesthetic language of their own, both self righteous and far removed from the cultural history of landscapes seems quite incredible today. I will not delve too long on the inherent aesthetic limitations of such universal models in both landscape and urban planning. Their blatant shortcomings in this domain as shown

by the work of the disciples of Kevin Lynch or Ian McHarg goes without saying. Landscape in my opinion is first and foremost the product of the strong imageable memory of a given place, and ecology can therefore only be but a small part of the general picture. To paraphrase the words of Simon Shama in his wonderful book entitled *Landscape and Memory*; he describes landscape as an explicitly sensual and aesthetic phenomenon grounded on the powerful residue of "mythic unreason". This, as a matter of fact is precisely why it makes so much sense to pursue our work on "movism" and immediate visual memorisation given the present state of things.



"But acknowledging the ambiguous legacy of nature myths does at least require us to recognize that landscape will not always be "simple places of delight" - scenery as sedative, topography so arranged to feast the eye. For those eyes, as we will discover, are seldom clarified of the promptings of memory. And memories are not all of pastoral picnics... And even today, the most zealous friends of the earth become understandably impatient with the shuffles and scuffles, compromises and bargains of politics when the "death of nature" is said to be imminent, and the alternatives presented as a bleak choice between redemption and extinction. It is at this point, when environmental imperatives are invested with sacred, mythic quality, which is said to demand a dedication purer and more uncompromising than the habits of humanity usually supply, that memory may help to redress the balance." ²

The question of modelling and its inherent limitations, takes us to yet another level of questioning which concerns the overwhelming prevalence of plan and cartography in the environmental design, planning and engineering professions. The plan, which in and of itself is such a reductive and codified instrument, has almost substituted itself for the loss of a referential picture of nature mentioned above. The Swiss historian André Corboz has found the appropriate words to describe our dilemma and how deep the problem really is:

"... The map is purer than the land, for it obeys the prince. It is open to every design which it concretises by anticipation and whose correctness it seems to prove. This sort of trompe l'oeil not only visualizes the actual territory to which it refers, it can incarnate things, which are not ..."

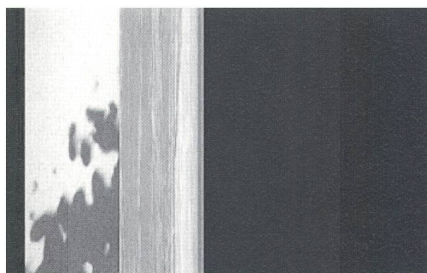
André Corboz



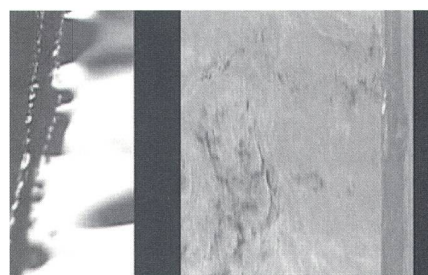


"To represent the land means to understand it. But such representation is not a tracing but always a creation. A map drawn first to know and then to act. It has in common with the land the fact of being a process, a product, a project. And since it is also form and meaning, there is the danger that it be taken for a subject. Created as a model, with the fascination of a microcosm, an extremely malleable simplification, it tends to substitute itself for reality. The map is purer than the land, for it obeys the prince. It is open to every design which it concretises by anticipation and whose correctness it seems to prove. This sort of *trompe l'oeil* not only visualizes the actual territory to

which it refers, it can incarnate things, which are not. It can show non existant land just as seriously as an actual one, which shows that it is better to be prudent. It is constantly in danger of dissimulating what it is supposed to be making clear." ³



One could probably go-on for chapters about the moribund destiny of our world bound to past present and future plans which overlay and contradict each other successively. The practice of plan modelling and plan design which has become so widespread, substitutes itself for the world out there and the more complex tools of representation and perception of space that are at our disposal. Has anyone ever questioned the use of the plan and its inherent two-dimentional limitations, in light of projects produced over the past decades? Because the plan is scientific and precise does not necessarily mean that it is adapted to the landscape. We all know that some of our most splendid landscapes were never drawn in plan, but rather drawn in the mud and stuff of the very site itself. Are we so far removed from reality today as to accept this "planar withdrawal" as a fatality? A return to the visual and physical world seems absolutely necessary today, and I am convinced that "movism" will lead the way to a stronger and more palatable link with a given terrain and its environs.



No we are not trying to reinvent the wheel of landscape architecture, we are just readjusting our way of seeing with our epoch. It was in fact my predecessor at the Chair,



Dieter Kienast, who decided to bring video into the realm of landscape research and teaching at the ETH. And it did take me a while to understand the potential and interest that such a new visual media could bring to the discipline. When students decide to make a video on a parcel of land in and around Zurich, what are the visual and thematic criteria that they choose, and what are the references that they can use? We are a far cry from the old analytical method seeking to resolve step by step all the problems of a place in plan, from a macro scale down to the detail. The present field is wide open and a student who chooses to engage in a poetic and filmic meditation on the deep mysteries of a rainwater puddle or a babbling brook may do so for an entire semester. Others may simply think that the play of sunlight and nightlight on a concrete freeway interchange is of prime importance, and can unabashedly relate it back to Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Others yet again may simply show a young man incessantly criss-crossing a dusty vacant lot in the heart of Zurich's old industrial heartland. These student projects all have in common the fact that they are a visual assessment of a given place at a given time. They are all, without exception, light years away from a conventional plan guide to Zurich. They literally show us another city than we are accustomed to, and the nature that is shown is often mutant and unaesthetic. The works are stunning by their simplicity and directness, they show us the landscape as it is in a most subjective and suggestive way.

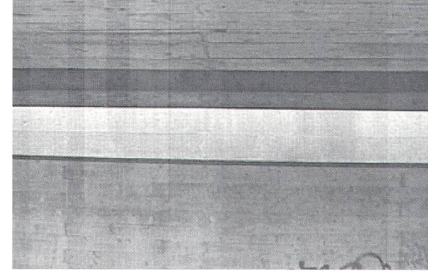
What is the difference between this work in the realm of landscape architecture and say the work of students in an art school and a film school? All the short films seen here, made by students under the direction of Marc Schwarz, engage a potentially new way of looking at landscape. They underline with much irony the forgotten meaning of nature and its processes at the very heart of our cities. The videos mix in men with nature and almost always bring in a component of alteration through time, erosion and movement. The difference with an art school is that the students are all architects and landscape architects in training, their way of looking at landscape is therefore both pragmatic, conceptual and poetic. "Movism" at this stage in teaching is simply the acceptance of a multiplicity of differently structured points of view about the landscape under study

We believe that the moving image and more particularly video is the proper tool to generate both site analysis and design. It is much closer to the elemental and intuitive description of any given place than a plan. The line of sight offered by video can be a complex sequence of events or a meditative

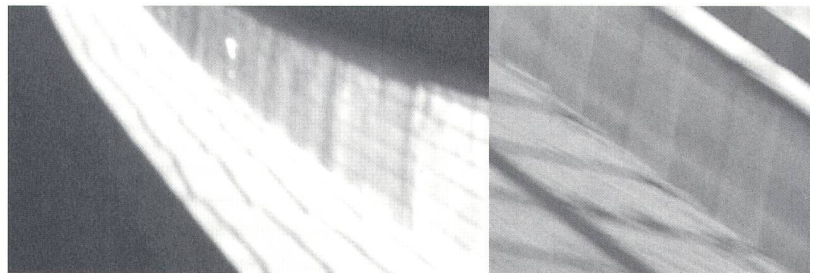
"... through the fatigue of a journey where only the void that exists exists by nature of the action undertaken to cross it. "

Paul Virilio





contemplation of stillness. It can engage actors and parts of the body with the outside world. And finally, it is more congruent with all the movement and perceptual phenomenon that we are accustomed to in our daily lives. Beyond the haptic and elemental video experiences sampled here today, the moving image can become both a reference piece and a tool of investigation. Although it is still not clear how the moving image taken from reality can transform itself into a ready made design product, the capacity for reflection, suggestion and provocation shown here is of particular importance for our field. Nothing to my mind is more important than visiting a site prior to design, in whatever way it is done, the result is always different because of climate, people, time and change. The ever changing qualities of a given site are indeed particularly difficult to grasp, and "movism" introduces the very notion of relativity and subjectivity in our work. The answer is still not clear yet exactly how to go about all this, but with "movism" the general tone and direction is given. Here is a quote by Paul Virilio which will hopefully make my point a little clearer.



"Since it is use that defines terrestrial space, the environment, we cannot cover any expanse or therefore any (geophysical) "quantity" except through the effort of more or less lasting (physical) motion, through the fatigue of a journey where only the void that exists exists by nature of the action undertaken to cross it."

Some famous French landscape architects have theorized about the "garden in movement", more from the side of plant diversity and ecological dynamics. "Movism" or the theory of landscape in movement integrates, in my view a far broader spectrum of considerations ranging from cultural, spatial and biotic habits in the landscape all the way down to phonic, tactile, visual,

1 Berger, John: *The Sense of Sight*, New York 1985

2 Schama, Simon: *Landscape and Memory*, London 1995

3 Corboz, André: *The World as palimpsest*, in: Dogenes 121, 1983



and kinetic parameters. The use of new media such as video in teaching has brought a new pedagogic dimension to the forefront; that of the right for students to contemplate and consider any given environment in a singular variety of ways before leaping into a process of design. We are not sure whether this is the only way to investigate the extremely complex question concerning the recovery of a new visual theory in landscape architecture, but together with the Landscape Video Lab team at the ETH we intend to pursue this research further in order to break the spell between the landscape that we imagine and the landscape that we live in.

Christophe Girot, ETH Zurich, March 2001



Christophe Girot ist Professor für Landschaftsarchitektur am ORL-Institut der ETH Zürich.